

Eric Bucher has been selected as the 2015 Phoenix South First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.

Bucher has engaged in awareness-raising efforts such as:

- Trained in Early Childhood, Every Day and the Write Way.
- Hosted FTF tables at various events.
- Shared FTF messages during his trainings at the Arizona Science Center.



We recently caught up with Bucher, who worked previously as the Early Childhood Learning & Engagement Specialist at Arizona Science Center, and now is a Training/Curriculum Specialist with Southwest Human Development, adjunct faculty at Paradise Valley Community College, and serves on the board of the Valley of the Sun Association for the Education of Young Children (VSAEYC).

Bucher has more than eight years of dedication to and experience in the field of early childhood education and works collaboratively to strengthen the early childhood system in the state of Arizona. Bucher has a Master in Education, Early Childhood Leadership from Northern Arizona University and plans to continue toward a doctorate in Early Childhood professional development with an emphasis on science with young children.

Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: As a Champion for Young Children, I recognize that young children and their families have the right, both morally and democratically, to meaningful early experiences which help foster foundational lifelong learning skills like literacy, healthy choices, persistence, attention, motivation, effective communication, collaboration, the ability to think logically and creatively, and pleasure in the process of learning. Early childhood development and health is critical because when children and their families have access to community resources and tools that promote healthy cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development, they significantly increase their ability to succeed in school and in life.

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness of early childhood issues?

A: I care deeply for Arizona's children and families. Our children and families deserve early childhood champions who engage in dialogue with them about community services, offer resources to support the development of literacy and other important lifelong learning skills, and become a system of collaborative support to shape the future of early childhood in Arizona. First Things First's Early Childhood Everyday training taught me specific touch points I can utilize to explain how early childhood education benefits all. Now more than ever, I feel empowered to advocate to our state leaders and our community to enhance public education in early childhood issues and strengthen the possibilities for a positive future for every child.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: Research shows us that the earliest years are the most significant in a child's development. Knowing that 90% of a child's critical brain development happens by age 5 is a compelling call to action! Just like a child's earliest experiences strengthen their foundation for lifelong learning, grassroots awareness of early childhood development and health strengthens the system of support between families and communities and creates a strong voice for action. In solidarity, a voice is strong, but with others, a voice is powerful.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: The awareness around the importance of children's early years has increased dramatically in the Phoenix South community thanks to the easy talking points, relevant research, and ample community engagement opportunities provided by First Things First. When I first began my work in this community four years ago, I remember bringing up early childhood in dialogue with other professionals at a conference. Many of them had not heard about First Things First or did not know the expansive access to resources its website and Facebook page provides. Thanks to the support of ever-increasing Champions for Children, the families, educators, and members of our Phoenix South community understand the impact of early experiences on future learning and success. Whether a parent, preschool educator, doctor, or legislator, the conversation seems to have shifted from "Why is early childhood important?" to "What else can I do to support early childhood: our children and our families?"

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: First and foremost, I think people in our community should know that they are not alone. There are innumerable families, educators, and other stakeholders who also have a passion for promoting early childhood development and health and who are Champions for Children. We are in this work together to better the now and the future for Arizona's children and families.

In example, Southwest Human Development offers a multitude of services that meet the needs of children, families, and educators from professional development workshops for early care

and education professionals to inclusion support for children with special needs to the Birth to Five Helpline, a free community resource. There are many ways to get involved in these supportive early childhood programs. Interested community members can check out www.swhd.org.

Moreover, I would suggest that our community members take a few moments to check out www.readyazkids.com for more information about early childhood. To get involved, I would suggest bringing up early childhood facts from the website in conversation as often as possible: at weekend event, while relatives visit in town, even chatting in the checkout line at the grocery store! A strong system of early childhood in Arizona is crucial to the success not only of our youngest children but also of the sustainability of our entire community. As we continue the conversation with others about what we know about the importance of children's earliest years, we increase awareness and, in turn, continue to build that system of support.

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About First Things First – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit azftf.gov.